SŪRAH 66

Al-Taḥrīm
(Prohibition)

Prologue

God has willed that Islam should be His final message, and the code of living it outlines should be the one suitable for the rest of human life. Furthermore, the life of those who believe in Islam should be consistent with the law that governs the universe, and Islam should be the faith to guide human life and shape all its activities. Therefore, He made this code of living comprehensive and perfect, catering for all human abilities and potentials. At the same time, this code elevates such abilities and potentials to the level suited for the creature God has placed in charge of the earth, honouring him above many of His other creatures, and blowing into him of His own spirit. Consistent with this will of His, God has made Islam naturally forward-looking. It enables life to grow while at the same time elevating it to the highest standard of purity. It does not stop any creative aspect or suppress a useful potential. On the contrary, it awakens and enhances these while ensuring a proper balance between forward movement and rising to a higher horizon. It is this which prepares the human spirit in this life for the superior happiness and bliss of the life to come, and the human mortal for a life everlasting.

God has also willed that the Messenger who delivers this final message should be a man who reflects the faith, with all its distinctive

characteristics and its special nature. Thus, as he goes through life, the Prophet becomes a true and practical translation of this faith, its nature and direction. He is an ordinary human being whose human abilities have attained a high standard: physically strong, with perfect constitution, sound senses, alert, able to perfectly feel all there is to feel. At the same time, he is full of emotion, naturally alert and sensitive, appreciates beauty, and is receptive and responsive. Moreover, he is of great intelligence, broad-minded, strong-willed, and he controls his feelings and reactions. Above all this, he is the Prophet whose soul reflects pure light, able to undertake the night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem and his subsequent ascendance to heaven. He is the one who is addressed from on high, sees the light of his Lord, and whose nature is in touch with the nature of everything in the universe: small and large stones greet him, the branches of trees yearn for contact with him, and Uḥud, the mountain, shakes at his presence. All these powers and potentials are balanced within his personality in such a way as to reflect the balance of the faith he has been chosen to present to humanity.

God has made the Prophet's life, its private and public aspects, an open book for the benefit of his followers and humanity at large. They can read in it all aspects of the Islamic faith and its practical implementation. Hence, there is nothing in it that is secret or limited to a closed circle. Indeed, many of its aspects are stated in the Qur'ān, revealing things that for an ordinary person are normally kept private. Indeed, even those aspects of human weakness, which are beyond our control, are left open for all to see. We almost see the wisdom behind so revealing such aspects of the Prophet's life to mankind. Nothing in his person or in his life belongs exclusively to him. He and all aspects of his life belong to his message. Why should, then, any aspect of his life be hidden? His life is the Islamic faith, something that is both close to us and easy to implement. The Prophet is assigned the task of presenting it in practice in his own life, just as he presents it by word and directive. This is the role assigned to him.

His Companions – may God be pleased with them and reward them well – conveyed to us all the details of his life. Nothing, whether of little or great importance in his daily life, is left unrecorded. It was part of God's will to have such a detailed record of His Messenger's life, or

rather to have a detailed record of Islam as lived by the Prophet. What his Companions reported is added to what the Qur'ān records of the Prophet's life and both form an everlasting record of this noble life, which benefits all humanity.

The Prophet's Wives

In its opening section, this *sūrah* presents an episode of life in the Prophet's home, showing some of the reactions and responses between some of his wives, and between them and himself. It also shows how these reactions and responses were reflected in the life of the Muslim community as a whole. This is followed by directives given to the community on the basis of what took place in the Prophet's homes, between his wives.

The time when these events took place is not precise, but reference to the various reports detailing them confirm that they definitely occurred after the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh.

It may also be useful to give here a summary of the Prophet's marriages and his home life at that time. This will enable us to visualize the events referred to in the *sūrah*. This brief outline is based on *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah* by Ibn Ḥazm and the Prophet's biography by Ibn Hishām. We will also add some brief comments as appropriate.

The Prophet's first wife was Khadījah bint Khuwaylid. He was 25, or perhaps 23,[1] when he married her. She was 40 or even older.[2] She died three years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. He did not marry another wife during her lifetime, and by then he was over 50 years of age.

After Khadījah's death, the Prophet married Sawdah bint Zima'h. There are no reports to suggest that she was either pretty or young. She was a widow of al-Sakrān ibn 'Amr ibn 'Abd Shams. Her husband

1. Other figures of the Prophet's age are mentioned in different reports: the lowest year of age is 21 and the highest is 30. – Editor's note.

2. Khadījah is commonly thought to have been 40 at the time of her marriage to the Prophet. This is highly unlikely as she gave the Prophet six children over a period of ten years. Other reports suggest that she was 25, 28, 30, 35 and even 45 years of age. One of the lower figures is more likely. – Editor's note.

was one of the early Muslims, and he was among the first migrants to Abyssinia. When he died, the Prophet married her.

He then married ʿĀ'ishah bint Abū Bakr. She apparently was young, and he did not hold his wedding with her until he had settled in Madīnah. She was the only virgin he married, and she was the one he loved most. It is said that she was only nine years of age at the time of her marriage.[3] By the time he passed away, she had been with him nine years and five months.

The Prophet then married Ḥafṣah bint ʿUmar, just over two years after settling in Madīnah. She had been married before. Her father had offered her in marriage to Abū Bakr and to ʿUthmān, but they both declined. The Prophet had promised her father something better for her so he married her himself.

He then married Zaynab bint Khuzaymah. Her first husband, ʿUbaydah ibn al-Ḥārith ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, was killed at the Battle of Badr. Zaynab died during the Prophet's lifetime. It is also reported that her first husband was ʿAbdullāh ibn Jaḥsh who fell a martyr at the Battle of Uḥud. Perhaps this report is more accurate.

The Prophet also married Umm Salamah. Her first husband, Abū Salamah, was wounded at the Battle of Uḥud, and his wound did not heal until he died. The Prophet then married her, looking after her children by her first husband.

Zaynab bint Jaḥsh was his next wife. He himself had given her in marriage to Zayd ibn Ḥārithah, his former servant whom he had adopted as a son, but marital life between her and Zayd was fraught with difficulties. So, he divorced her. We related their story when discussing verses 36–40 of *Sūrah* 33, The Confederates, in Volume XIV.[4] She was pretty. Indeed, she was the one ʿĀ'ishah felt most able to compete with because she was the Prophet's cousin, born to his paternal aunt, and because of her beauty.

3. This is again highly unlikely. She is mentioned among the early Muslims, which suggests that she was old enough to accept the new faith nine years before her marriage. Different reports of her reaction to events and statements suggest that she was perhaps twice this age at the time of her marriage. – Editor's note.

4. Sayyid Quṭb (2006), *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIV, Leicester, Islamic Foundation, pp. 82–91.

Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith was the next wife to be taken by the Prophet. This was in the middle of the sixth year of the Islamic calendar. Ibn Isḥāq attributes the following report to 'Ā'ishah: "When the Prophet distributed the women taken slaves after the Expedition of al-Muṣṭalaq, Juwayriyyah fell to Thābit ibn Qays ibn Shammās or his cousin. She made an agreement with him to buy her own freedom. She was very pretty. Anyone who saw her felt very attracted. She went to the Prophet seeking his help in paying what she owed for her freedom. When I saw her at my doorstep, I hated her, realizing that the Prophet would see of her beauty what I saw. She entered his room and said to him: 'Messenger of God. I am Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith. My father is the chief of his tribe. You are not unaware of the trouble that has befallen me. I am here to seek your help in paying for my freedom after I had made an agreement to so buy myself.' He said to her: 'What about something better?' She asked him: 'What is that, Messenger of God?' He said: 'I will pay for your freedom and marry you.' She said: 'I accept.' He said: 'It is a deal.'"

The Prophet married Umm Ḥabībah bint Abū Sufyān after the al-Ḥudaybiyah Peace Treaty. She had migrated to Abyssinia, but her husband, 'Ubaydullāh ibn Jaḥsh, converted to Christianity there and left her. The Prophet proposed marriage to her. It was King Negus who officiated at the marriage and paid her dowry on behalf of the Prophet.[5] She then returned to Madīnah.

Following the Battle of Khaybar, the Prophet married Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab. Her father was the chief of the Jewish tribe, al-Naḍīr. She had been married to Kinānah ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, a Jewish leader. Ibn Isḥāq reports that "she was brought to him with another woman who had fallen prisoner. Bilāl walked them through the battlefield passing a number of Jews who had been slain. The other woman cried out loud as they passed by, throwing dust over her own head. The Prophet said: 'Take this devil woman away from me.' He

5. The Prophet sent a messenger to Negus to arrange this marriage on his behalf, when he heard of Umm Ḥabībah's plight after she had lost her husband. This was some time before al-Ḥudaybiyah's peace treaty. However, she only arrived in Madīnah after that event. – Editor's note.

ordered that Ṣafiyyah be kept behind him, throwing his robe over her. His Companions thereby realized that he would take her himself. The Prophet is reported to have said to Bilāl: 'Are you devoid of compassion? How can you walk two women through the grounds where their menfolk have been killed?'"

Maymūnah bint al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥazn was the last of the Prophet's wives. She was the maternal aunt of Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās. Before marrying the Prophet she was married to Abū Ruḥm ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā, or perhaps Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā.

Thus, we see the special reasons that made it necessary for the Prophet to marry each of his wives. Apart from Zaynab bint Jaḥsh and Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith, none were young or particularly attractive to men.[6] 'Ā'ishah was the one he loved most. Even in the case of those wives who were young and beautiful, there were psychological and humanitarian factors involved in their marriages. These increased their attraction. I do not deny or disregard the physical attraction, or beauty 'Ā'ishah felt the moment she saw Juwayriyyah, while Zaynab's beauty was also known to all. There is no need to deny that such human elements were a part of the Prophet's life. These cannot, however, form the basis for accusations levelled by the Prophet's enemies and which were denied by his followers. He was chosen as a human being, but with superior qualities and characteristics. Different as they were, his motives for whatever he did in his life, including his marriages, matched his superior qualities. In his home, he lived with his wives as a human being entrusted with the delivery of God's message. Indeed, God commanded him to declare the fact: "*Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.*'" (17: 93)

He enjoyed life with his wives, as so did they. 'Ā'ishah states: "When the Prophet was alone with his wives, he was the most lenient and generous of people, always smiling and laughing." [Related by al-Suyūṭī and Ibn 'Asākir.] Yet this applied to what he himself could offer out of his character, compassion, manners and behaviour. As for their material life, it was mostly a life of poverty, even after the Muslim community

6. We should perhaps add Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy as well, who was also young at the time the Prophet married her. – Editor's note.

achieved several victories and made plentiful gains. In commenting on *Sūrah* 33, The Confederates, we discussed the crisis that took place in the Prophet's home when his wives asked for more housekeeping money.[7] The problem ended with a choice put to them in the following terms: "*Prophet! Say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.*'" (33: 28–29) They all chose God, His Messenger and the life of the hereafter.

Nevertheless, life in the Prophet's home was not such as to stifle normal human feelings and jealousies in his wives' minds. Sometimes they had their disagreements, just like those that may occur among women in similar circumstances. We have seen how the moment 'Ā'ishah saw Juwayriyyah, she hoped that the Prophet would not see her because she was certain he would appreciate her beauty. She was right. 'Ā'ishah herself mentions a situation involving her and Ṣafiyyah: "I said to the Prophet: 'It is enough that Ṣafiyyah is so and so,' [meaning, she was short]. He said to me: 'You have said a word which could colour an entire sea.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] She also reports that when the verses giving the Prophet's wives the choice referred to above, she was the first to be asked, and she chose to stay with the Prophet. She also requested that he not tell his other wives of her choice should any of them so ask. He said to her: "God has not sent me to make things hard for people. He sent me as a teacher who makes things easier. I will tell anyone of them about your choice should any care to ask." [Related by Muslim.]

These reports given by 'Ā'ishah about herself, reflecting her truthfulness and her shining Islamic education, are only examples of many others reflecting the normal way ordinary people behave in such a situation. They also show how the Prophet delivered his message through good example, cultivating the better characteristics of his household members, just as he delivered it by good example within his community.

7. This discussion is included in Volume XIV, pp. 61–66.

Al-Taḥrīm (Prohibition)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (1)

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ لِمَ تُحَرِّمُ مَا أَحَلَّ اللَّهُ لَكَ تَبْتَغِي مَرْضَاتَ أَزْوَاجِكَ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise. (2)

قَدْ فَرَضَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ تَحِلَّةَ أَيْمَانِكُمْ وَاللَّهُ مَوْلَاكُمْ وَهُوَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢﴾

The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives. When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.' (3)

وَإِذْ أَسَرَّ النَّبِيُّ إِلَىٰ بَعْضِ أَزْوَاجِهِ حَدِيثًا فَلَمَّا نَبَّأَتْ بِهِ وَأَظْهَرَهُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ عَرَّفَ بَعْضَهُ وَأَعْرَضَ عَنْ بَعْضٍ فَلَمَّا نَبَّأَهَا بِهِ قَالَتْ مَنْ أَنْبَأَكَ هَٰذَا قَالَ نَبَّأَنِيَ الْعَلِيمُ الْخَبِيرُ ﴿٣﴾

Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him. (4)

إِنْ تَتُوبَا إِلَى اللَّهِ فَقَدْ صَغَتْ قُلُوبُكُمَا وَإِنْ تَظَاهَرَا عَلَيْهِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ مَوْلَاهُ وَجِبْرِيلُ وَصَالِحُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ بَعْدَ ذَٰلِكَ ظَهِيرٌ ﴿٤﴾

عَسَىٰ رَبُّهُۥٓ إِن طَلَّقَكُنَّ أَن يُبْدِلَهُۥٓ
أَزْوَٰجًا خَيْرًا مِّنكُنَّ مُسْلِمَٰتٍ مُّؤْمِنَٰتٍ
قَٰنِتَٰتٍ تَٰٓئِبَٰتٍ عَٰبِدَٰتٍ سَٰٓئِحَٰتٍ
ثَيِّبَٰتٍ وَأَبْكَارًا ﴿٥﴾

Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins. (5)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ قُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَكُمْ
وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱلْحِجَارَةُ
عَلَيْهَا مَلَٰٓئِكَةٌ غِلَاظٌ شِدَادٌ لَّا يَعْصُونَ
ٱللَّهَ مَآ أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones, over which are appointed angels, stern and mighty, who never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do. (6)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَا تَعْتَذِرُوا۟ ٱلْيَوْمَ
إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You will only be requited for what you used to do. (7)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ تُوبُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ تَوْبَةً
نَّصُوحًا عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يُكَفِّرَ عَنكُمْ
سَيِّـَٔاتِكُمْ وَيُدْخِلَكُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى
مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ يَوْمَ لَا يُخْزِى ٱللَّهُ
ٱلنَّبِىَّ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ ۖ نُورُهُمْ
يَسْعَىٰ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَٰنِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَآ أَتْمِمْ لَنَا نُورَنَا وَٱغْفِرْ لَنَآ ۖ إِنَّكَ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٨﴾

Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.' (8)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ جَٰهِدِ ٱلْكُفَّارَ وَٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ وَٱغْلُظْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَمَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٩﴾

Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. (9)

ضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ٱمْرَأَتَ نُوحٍ وَٱمْرَأَتَ لُوطٍ ۖ كَانَتَا تَحْتَ عَبْدَيْنِ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا صَٰلِحَيْنِ فَخَانَتَاهُمَا فَلَمْ يُغْنِيَا عَنْهُمَا مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا وَقِيلَ ٱدْخُلَا ٱلنَّارَ مَعَ ٱلدَّٰخِلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

God has given examples of unbelievers: Noah's wife and Lot's wife. They were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.' (10)

وَضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱمْرَأَتَ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ٱبْنِ لِى عِندَكَ بَيْتًا فِى ٱلْجَنَّةِ وَنَجِّنِى مِن فِرْعَوْنَ وَعَمَلِهِۦ وَنَجِّنِى مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١١﴾

God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh's wife, who said: 'My Lord! Build me a mansion in heaven near You, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from the wrongdoing folk.' (11)

وَمَرْيَمَ ٱبْنَتَ عِمْرَٰنَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِنَا وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَٰتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُتُبِهِۦ وَكَانَتْ مِنَ ٱلْقَٰنِتِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed of Our spirit into her. She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout. (12)

The Event

The opening section of the *sūrah* speaks of an event in the lives of the Prophet and his wives. Although there are a number of reports giving different versions of what actually took place, we will leave these for now and return to them a little later. Based on this incident and the directives issued in connection with it, particularly the request that the two conspirators among the Prophet's wives repent, the *sūrah* also calls on believers to repent of their sins and requires that heads of families ensure their families are well brought up. They are specifically urged to protect themselves and their families from hell. A direct image of hell is also included here. The *sūrah* then concludes by citing various examples. Noah's and Lot's wives are shown as examples of unfaith in a house emanating belief, while Pharaoh's wife is depicted as someone holding to right faith while living in a house full of unbelievers. Mary is also shown as a pure woman who received a breath of God's spirit and believed in God's words and scriptures.

> *Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise. The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives. When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.' Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him. Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins.* (Verses 1–5)

The Reports

There are several reports about the event in question, one of which is related by al-Bukhārī, which means that it is authentic. On 'Ā'ishah's authority, al-Bukhārī relates: "The Prophet used to have a honey drink at Zaynab bint Jaḥsh's home and then stay for some time with her. Ḥafṣah and I secretly agreed that when he came to either of us we would say to him: 'You have eaten *Maghāfir*[8]; I can smell it.' When this occurred, he said: 'No. I only had a honey drink at Zaynab's. I will not do it again, and I have made an oath to this effect. Do not tell anyone of this.' This is what he prohibited himself, even though it was permissible for him to have."

It seems that either 'Ā'ishah or Ḥafṣah told her co-conspirator of the Prophet's decision to no longer take this honey drink. God then informed him of the same. He went back to her and mentioned some of what went on between the two of them, but without recounting it all in order not to embarrass her. He only touched upon the subject so that she realized that he was aware of it all. Surprised, she asked him: 'Who told you all this?' It might have occurred to her that his other wife was the one to tell him. He, however, said to her: '*The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.*' (Verse 3) His information, then, was given by the One who knows it all, which, in turn, implies that the Prophet was also aware of it *in toto*, not merely what he mentioned to her.

This incident angered the Prophet, exposing as it did that intrigue was going on in his home. He, therefore, swore that he would not touch any of his wives for a full month. People in the Muslim community also heard that the Prophet was thinking of divorcing his wives. This *sūrah* was then revealed and the Prophet's anger subsided. Subsequently, he resumed his life with his wives. We will presently mention how this happened, but we will first give a different version of the incident.

This second version is related by al-Nasā'ī on Anas's authority: "The Prophet had a bondswoman with whom he had sex. His wives, 'Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah, put pressure to bear on him until he prohibited himself from doing so. God revealed the verses starting with *"Prophet, why do you*

8. *Maghāfir* is a glue-like type of food with a sweet taste and bad smell.

prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives?" (Verse 1) Another report given by Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Isḥāq mentions that the Prophet had sex with Maria, the mother of his son Ibrahīm, in Ḥafṣah's home. Ḥafṣah was very angry, considering this to be an insult against her person. The Prophet promised her he would banish Maria from him, swearing to this, and he asked Ḥafṣah to keep this a secret, but she told 'Ā'ishah.

Either one of these two incidents may have taken place. However, the second report involving Maria may be closer to what we can understand from the text of the *sūrah* and the consequences that led to the Prophet being so angry that he even considered divorcing his wives. Taken together, this suggests that the matter was very sensitive and involved. The first report concerning the Prophet's favourite honey drink is more authentic with regard to its transmission. While it is not as serious as the second incidence implies, it might have led to such serious consequences if we take into account the high moral standards prevailing in the Prophet's home. Regardless though of what actually did happen, we should place our trust in God for He knows the truth of it all.

The Outcome

What, then, were the effects of this incident and the Prophet's decision to stay away from his wives for a month? This is best described in a *ḥadīth* related by Imām Aḥmad in *Al-Musnad,* which quotes 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās:

> I was keen to ask 'Umar about the Prophet's two wives in reference to whom God says in the Qur'ān: '*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved.*' When 'Umar went on pilgrimage, I went with him. As we were travelling, he moved from the rest and I went with him, carrying a water container. He relieved himself and came back to me. I poured water for him to do his ablution. I then asked him: 'Which two of the Prophet's wives are referred to in God's statement, '*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved*'?' He said: 'I wonder at you, Ibn 'Abbās!' [Al-Zuhrī comments here that 'Umar disliked

being asked about this, but he did not withhold the information.] 'Umar said: 'They were 'Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah.' He then told me the story.

We, the Quraysh, used to have complete authority over our wives. When we settled in Madīnah, however, we found its people more submissive to their wives. Our women started to learn from their women. I used to live in Umayyah ibn Zayd's home in the highlands. One day, I was angry with my wife, as she objected to something I said. I disliked the fact that she should object to me. She said: 'Why are you so surprised that I should object? God's Messenger's own wives may object to something he says, and any of them may not speak to him the whole day, until night time.' I, therefore, went straight to Ḥafṣah[9] and asked her: 'Do you sometimes object to what the Prophet says?' She confirmed that she did. I asked: 'Would any of you refrain from speaking to him throughout the day, until nightfall?' She again answered in the affirmative. I said: 'Ill-advised and a loser indeed is any of you who does that! Do you not consider that any of you might incur God's anger as a result of His Messenger being angry, and then you end in ruin? Do not object to God's Messenger in anything he says, and do not ask anything from him. Take from me instead whatever you want. Do not be deluded by the fact that your friend [meaning 'Ā'ishah] is more pretty and is loved best by the Prophet.'

I had a neighbour from the Anṣār, with whom I took turns in going down to see the Prophet. He would go one day and I the next day. Each of us would inform the other of any new Qur'ānic revelations and of any events or developments. At the time, we were aware that the Ghassān[10] were preparing to invade us. My neighbour went to the Prophet one day and then came to me in the evening, knocking on my door. He called out and I went to see him. He said: 'A very serious matter took place.' I asked whether the Ghassān army was approaching. He said: 'No, something more serious than

9. Hafsah was 'Umar's daughter, married to the Prophet. – Editor's note.

10. The Ghassān was a major Arab tribe living in southern Syria and Palestine, as part of the Byzantine Empire. – Editor's note.

that. The Prophet has divorced his wives.' I said: 'Ill-advised and lost is Ḥafṣah! I thought that this might happen.'

In the morning, after I had prayed *Fajr*, I put on my clothes and went to Ḥafṣah. I found her crying. I asked her whether the Prophet had divorced his wives. She said: 'I do not know. He has shut himself in this room close by.' I went there and found a black servant. I said to him: 'Seek permission for 'Umar to enter.' He went in and came back, and said: 'I mentioned you to him but he did not reply.' I went away, and I found close to the pulpit in the mosque a few men sitting down, some of whom were in tears. I sat there for a short while and I was then overcome by my own grief. I went back to the servant and told him to seek permission for me to enter. He again went in and told me as he came out that he mentioned my name but the Prophet remained silent. Once more I went to sit near the pulpit until I was overcome by my feelings. I went a third time to the servant and told him to seek permission for me to see the Prophet. Yet he again told me when he came out that he mentioned my name but the Prophet did not reply. I went away, but soon the servant called me. He said: 'You can go in. He has given you permission.' As I went in, I greeted the Prophet. I found him sitting on a straw mat which had left its mark on his side. I asked him whether he had divorced his wives. He lifted his head and said: 'No.' I said: 'God is Supreme.'

I then said: 'Messenger of God. If you could but see us, the Quraysh, when we used to have complete authority over our wives. When we settled in Madīnah, however, we found its people more submissive to their wives. Our women started to learn from their women. I used to live in Umayyah ibn Zayd's home in the highlands. One day, I was angry with my wife, as she objected to something I said. I disliked the fact that she should object to me'. She said: 'Why are you so surprised that I should object? God's Messenger's own wives may object to something he says, and any of them may not speak to him the whole day, until night time.' I then said to Ḥafṣah: 'Ill-advised and a loser indeed is any of you who does that! Do you not consider that any of you might incur God's anger as a result of His Messenger being angry with you, and

so end in ruin?' The Prophet smiled as I said this. I then told him that I said to my daughter that she should not to be deluded by the fact that her friend [meaning 'Ā'ishah] was prettier and loved the best by the Prophet. The Prophet smiled again. I asked whether I could sit down with him and he invited me to so sit.

As I lifted my head, looking around his home, I found absolutely nothing of note, apart from his dignified presence. I said: 'Messenger of God. Pray to God to give your community abundance of things. He has given abundance to the Persians and the Byzantines while they do not worship God.' He sat up and said to me: 'Are you in doubt, Ibn al-Khattab? These are people who have been given their good shares in this present life.' I said: 'Please pray to God to forgive me.' The Prophet had vowed not to come near his wives for a month, because he was so aggrieved by them. Because of this, God took issue with him. [This report is related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī on al-Zuhrī's authority, with different chains of transmission.]

The Qur'ānic Discussion

Such is the reporting of the incident in historical sources. We will now look at its treatment in the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* begins with a mild reproach by God to His Messenger:

> *Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise.* (Verses 1–2)

The reproach is mild but effective. It is not proper for a believer to prohibit himself something that God has made lawful. The Prophet had not imposed a legal prohibition on himself with regard to the honey drink he liked or to Maria. He only decided to refrain from enjoying either. This gentle reproach makes it clear that it is not right to deliberately deprive oneself of what God has made lawful in order to

appease someone else. The comment at the end of the verse is: '*God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*' This suggests that such deliberate action would require questioning unless it was overlooked by an act of God's forgiveness and grace.

As for the oath that the Qur'ānic text suggests the Prophet made, God stated a way for him to release himself from it. This means that an oath that establishes a situation other than what is best should be atoned for so as to release oneself from it and then take up the better option. "*God is your Lord Supreme.*" (Verse 2) He helps you to overcome your weaknesses and to cope with what may be hard for you. Hence, he has ordained for you a way out of your oaths so as to ensure that you do not incur unnecessary hardship. "*He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) He legislates for you on the basis of His absolute knowledge and perfect wisdom. He only commands you to do what is within your power and what is best suited for you. Therefore, do not prohibit yourselves anything other than what He has forbidden, and continue to make lawful only what He has made lawful. It is clear that the comment here fits perfectly with the directive already stated.

The *sūrah* then refers to what the Prophet said to one of his wives, but mentions neither its subject matter nor its details. None of this is important. What is important, however, is what it signified and the knock-on effects it generated: "*The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives.*" (Verse 3) What we are looking at here is something unique in human history. We are looking at a period when there was direct contact between heaven and ordinary people. Here is a direct, public and detailed intervention by heaven in human affairs. God informs the Prophet of a conversation between two of his wives concerning something he had told one of them in confidence. When the Prophet mentioned this to the wife who had divulged it, he only hinted at a certain aspect of it, rather than giving her a detailed account. At the same time, he also informed her of the source of his information: it was the One solid source that could not be mistaken: "*When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.'*" (Verse 3)

The choice of God's attributes of perfect knowledge and complete awareness of everything particularly suit the conspiratory situation under discussion. Thus, the one who asked the question is reminded of that which she might have forgotten or overlooked. We are all so reminded whenever we read the Qur'ān.

A change of style then follows. The *sūrah* is no longer reporting an incident; it is now addressing the two women involved, as if the matter is taking place at this very moment: "*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him.*" (Verse 4) They are, thus, invited to turn to God in repentance after their hearts had swerved from rightful action.

We so realize that the incident had such a profound effect on the Prophet as to require the statement that he is given full protection by God. Furthermore, Gabriel, the believers and all angels stand ready to give him their full support. The Prophet is thus reassured and comforted after this serious breach of confidence. Indeed, the whole situation must have been considered as very serious, implying far-reaching consequences for it to have necessitated such assurances. We can appreciate this for ourselves from the reports mentioned earlier, particularly the answer given by the Anṣārī man when 'Umar asked him about whether the Ghassān army was approaching. In fact his answer states that the matter was even more serious than that threat. Ghassān was an autonomous region in the tutelage of the Byzantine Empire, bordering the Arabian Peninsula. An attack by Ghassān on the Muslim community would have been very serious, yet the other matter was felt by Muslims to be even far more serious and far-reaching. They felt that the Prophet's own comfort and the maintenance of serenity and peace in his noble home were more important than anything else. This, then, gives us a clear indication of how the Muslim community viewed these developments, a view in line with how heaven treated it. It is, then, a correct view.

The next verse provides similar import. It details the qualities of the women whom God may give to His Messenger, should he divorce his current wives. This is addressed to all his wives by way of an implicit threat: "*Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead*

spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins." (Verse 5) They are, thus, indirectly called upon to adopt these qualities. The first quality is full submission to God and the fulfilment of all religious obligations. Next, is complete faith that leads to surrendering oneself to God, which is the literal meaning of the Arabic word *islam*. Devotion, the third quality, means conscious obedience of God. The Prophet's wives should also be penitent, which means that they should regret any slip into sin and follow this by turning to do God's bidding. To worship in humility is another quality they should possess. It is the means by which to communicate with God and express our submission to Him. Thoughtful reflection is how we have translated the quality the *sūrah* refers to by the Arabic word *sā'iḥāt*, which literally means 'wandering, contemplating'. What it means here is that they always reflect on God's creation and contemplate the great universe He has created. Having all these qualities, these new wives would be either virgins or previously married, in the same way as the Prophet married those wives already with him.

This warning was apparently necessary because of the telling effect their conspiracy had on the Prophet, incurring his anger. He was never given to anger, but the matter was clearly serious. The Prophet felt comforted and reassured when these verses were revealed, addressing him personally as also members of his household. Thereafter, the atmosphere in his blessed home regained its serenity as a direct result of God's statements. This was an honour given to the Prophet and his household, given their important role in the solid implementation of God's code for human life.

We have thus seen a picture of the home life of the man who was entrusted with establishing a nation and a state on hitherto unknown lines. This nation was to be entrusted with the fulfilment of divine faith in its final form. It was to be the practical establishment of a devout society that sets the example for future generations. We see also a picture of a man of exceptional greatness and nobility. Yet, he lived his humanity just as he fulfilled the tasks of his prophethood; the two were intertwined. It was God's will that he should be a human Messenger delivering His last message to mankind, outlining a perfect code for all humanity.

It is a perfect message delivered by a perfect Messenger. One aspect of its perfection is that its every adherent remains a human being: none of his abilities or talents are suppressed or prevented from developing and flourishing. At the same time, it cultivates and educates him so as to attain the highest standard within his power.

Thus has been the method of Islam with those who understood it well and who have moulded their lives on the basis of its teachings. They became living examples of Islam. The Prophet's practical life, with all that it involved of human experience, endeavours, strengths and weaknesses, was intertwined with the divine message. As we see in the case of those who were closest to him and his own family, his life was the practical example of how to live Islam. It set the model for those who wish to learn an easy and practical way of implementing God's message. It also steered away from theoretical assumptions that have no practical effect.

God's purpose was thus fulfilled: the final message to mankind was revealed in full, the Messenger who could receive it and give it its practical form was chosen, and his life was left as an open book for all, studied and reviewed by one generation after another.

A Believer's Responsibility

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers enjoining them to fulfil their family duties, providing good education, admonition and reminders so that they protect themselves and their families from hell. It provides an image of the fire and how the unbelievers stand before it. In line with the call to those involved in the earlier event to turn to God in repentance, the same call is made to the believers, adding an image of heaven which awaits those who repent of their sins. This second section of the *sūrah* concludes with a call on the Prophet to strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites:

> *Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones, over which are appointed angels, stern and mighty, who never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do. Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You*

will only be requited for what you used to do. Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.' Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. (Verses 6–9)

A believer's responsibility with regard to himself and his family is heavy and awesome. He and his family are liable to punishment in the fire of hell and it is his responsibility to protect himself and his family from such a dreadful fate. It is a terrible fire, "*fuelled by people and stones.*" (Verse 6) People there are treated in the same way as stones: cheap, abject and thrown away with a total disregard as to what may happen to them. A fire fuelled by stones must blaze fiercely, and a torment that combines its scourge with humiliation compounds the suffering. Everything about it is absolutely terrible: "*over [it] are appointed angels, stern and mighty,*" so that they suit the punishment they are required to administer. They "*never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do.*" (Verse 6) By nature they always obey every command God gives them, and are well able to carry out any such assignment. Possessing such qualities, they are chosen to guard the fire of hell, while every believer is responsible for protecting himself and his family from it. He has to attend to his responsibility now, in this life, before it is too late. When the chance is gone, no excuse is acceptable. The unbelievers will try to present excuses, but they are confronted with the facts that leave them in utter despair: "*Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You will only be requited for what you used to do.*" (Verse 7) That day is not a time for presenting excuses. It is the day when reward and punishment are given. The unbelievers will only take what their own actions incur.

How are the believers to protect themselves and their families from the fire of hell? The way is mapped out for them, and they are further equipped with great hope: "*Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into*

gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.'" (Verse 8) The way, then, begins with sincere repentance setting the heart on an honest course that allows no deception. This means genuine regret for past sins and a commitment to do what is good and required. Such repentance is certain to rid a person's heart of any residue sin may leave behind and encourages only what is good. Both qualities are necessary to make the repentance sincere and effective.

When repentance is sincere, it brings with it a hope that God will forgive the repentant their sins and admit them into heaven on the day when the unbelievers are given their humiliating punishment. No disgrace will on that day attach to the Prophet or those who followed him and accepted his message. This prospect is very tempting as it brings about great honour, with the believers being joined to the Prophet as one group treated with dignity when others are shamed. Furthermore, they are given light that "*spreads out before them and on their right.*" Thus they are identified among the great multitude, and they can find their way to their ultimate goal, which is heaven.

In that fearful position when everyone is in the grip of worried anticipation, they are inspired with a humble prayer: "*Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.*" (Verse 8) The fact that they say such a prayer when the situation makes everyone speechless is a sign that their prayer will be answered. God inspires believers to offer such a prayer only when He will be pleased to answer it. This means that their very prayer is a blessing God bestows on them in addition to the honour and the light already given to them.

How different all this is from the fire fuelled by people and stones! However, both reward and punishment highlight the responsibility of every believer to protect himself and his family from the fire and to place them in a position where they deserve to receive the reward of heaven. In the light of the event that took place in the Prophet's home, we can appreciate the message given in these verses. A believer is responsible for setting his household on the right way, just as he is responsible for ensuring that he purges his heart of sin and follows divine guidance.

As we said in our commentary on the previous *sūrah*, Divorce, Islam is a faith that takes care of the family. Therefore, it sets certain duties and responsibilities a believer must fulfil with regard to his home and family. The home is the nucleus of the Muslim community. Muslim families are the cells that make up the Muslim society. Every single home is a fortress of faith that must have no flaw in its internal structure. Everyone inside guards their positions so that no external enemy can infiltrate them. Otherwise, the whole society would be penetrated from within, and so would fall apart should any external attack occur. It is the first duty of a believer to attend to his home and family so that it is internally solid and well guarded. Before he tries to present his message to others, he must close any loophole within.

In this set up, a Muslim mother has an essential role to play; a Muslim father cannot on his own ensure the security of the fortress. Together, the two must cooperate fully in the upbringing of their sons and daughters. A group of men on their own can never succeed in establishing a Muslim society. Indeed, it is women who have a more important role to play in taking care of the new generation and safeguarding the future of the Muslim community. Hence, the Qur'ān addressed both men and women. It set out a system for the Muslim home, placing on believers a clear responsibility for their families, in the same way as they are responsible for themselves: "*Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones.*" (Verse 6)

Advocates of Islam must be fully aware of this and ensure that they put it into practice. Their first efforts must be addressed to their homes: to their wives and mothers first, and to their children and the rest of their families. Great importance should be attached to the education of the Muslim woman, so that she can make her family home a Muslim home. Anyone who wants his home to be Islamic must start by choosing a Muslim wife. Otherwise, the formation of a Muslim community will take far too long and its structure will remain weak and flawed.

Our Own Hard Task

The situation with the first Muslim community was easier than it is in our present day. A Muslim society was already established in

Madīnah, where Islam, its vision of a clean, virtuous human life and its laws based on this vision were the driving force. Men and women looked up to God and His Messenger for judgement. When judgement was given, it was accepted as final. In such a society, it was easy for women to mould themselves as Islam wanted them to be. Likewise, it was easy for husbands to advise their wives and bring up their children in line with the Islamic system.

We are now in a totally different situation, as we have sunk back into a state of *jāhiliyyah* that influences our society, its laws, morality, traditions, systems, manners and culture. Women find themselves in the midst of this society and feel its crushing pressures as they try to bring their lives in line with Islam, whether on their own initiative or guided by their fathers, husbands or brothers.

In that first Muslim community, the man, the woman and society all had the same perspective and looked to the same source for judgement. In our own time, the man is looking up to a theoretical abstract while the woman writhes under the heavy pressure of a society that is extremely hostile to her perspective. There is no doubt that the pressures society brings to bear on women are many times greater than its pressure on men. Hence, a believing man has a double duty: he must not only protect himself from the fire but also protect his family that is exposed to such pressures.

A Muslim man must realize the size of his responsibility in order to address it properly. This requires that he exert much greater efforts than a Muslim man in the first Muslim community. This is why it is essential for anyone who wants to establish a Muslim home to look first of all for a partner who can guard his fort. She must be a woman who derives her perspective from the same source, Islam. He will have to sacrifice certain things. He must sacrifice superficial attractions that society presents, looking instead for a woman of firm belief who will help him in building a Muslim family. Muslim fathers who want to be part of the Islamic revival must also realize that the new cells in this revival are a trust they must safeguard. It is their task to educate, cultivate and bring them up on Islamic lines before they address their message to anyone else. Only in this way can they fulfil God's orders as He bids them to protect themselves and their families from the fire.

Once more we refer to the nature of Islam that requires the establishment of a community that runs its affairs according to Islam and gives it a practical presence. Islam is based on the need to establish a community that believes in it and adopts it as a way of life and a code of law. It is from Islam, the complete and perfect system, that this community derives all its concepts and perspectives. Such a community is the fertile soil where Islam finds its practical model. Within this community, people look at this model and feel free of the pressures of an un-Islamic society. Moreover, the Muslim community ensures that its members are not subjected to any persecution.

We, thus, see the importance of establishing a Muslim community where Muslim girls and women live, protected from the crushing pressures of the un-Islamic society around them. In such a community they are no longer torn apart by their own Islamic perspective and traditions that are un-Islamic. A young Muslim man will find in that community a woman who will share life with him in a family nest, or a fortress, which is the first and primary unit of the Islamic camp.

It is essential rather than merely desirable for an Islamic community to be established along Islamic lines, adopting Islamic ideas, morality, manners and life concepts and implementing them within its own ranks. Only such a community can safeguard its concepts and values, advocating them in a practical way, seen by all. Thus individuals in an un-Islamic society, who are addressed by the advocates of Islam, will look at Islamic life and be motivated to come out of the darkness in which they live and replace it with the light Islam provides. Eventually, when God wills that Islam should triumph, new generations will be raised under its care, protected from the *jāhiliyyah* that has long prevailed.

It was to protect the first Muslim community that the command was issued to the Prophet to strive hard against those who take a hostile stand towards it: "*Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end.*" (Verse 9) This is particularly significant in light of the earlier command to the believers to protect themselves and their families against the fire of hell. It is also significant in respect of the invitation given to them to sincerely repent of their sins so that their bad deeds are erased and they are admitted into heaven. It highlights the importance

of safeguarding the environment where protection from the fire takes place. Thus, oppressive and wicked elements are not allowed to attack the Muslim community whether from outside, as the unbelievers used to do, or from within as the hypocrites did.

In its order to strive hard against the enemies of Islam, the Qur'ānic statement groups together both the unbelievers and the hypocrites because they shared the same mission – the destruction of the Muslim community, or at least its disintegration. To strive against them is, then, the sort of effort that protects from the fire, and to be hard against them is the proper response required of the Prophet and the believers in this present life. As for the life to come, "*their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end.*" (Verse 9)

We note that the harmonious tune this second section of the *sūrah* sings of its message is also in perfect harmony with the first section that dealt with a particular event in the Prophet's own home.

Contrasting Examples

The third and final section of the *sūrah* sounds as if it is a direct continuation of its first section. It speaks of unbelieving women married to prophets and women believers in the midst of unbelievers:

> *God has given examples of unbelievers: Noah's wife and Lot's wife. They were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.' God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh's wife, who said: 'My Lord! Build me a mansion in heaven near You, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from the wrongdoing folk.' And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed of Our spirit into her. She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout.* (Verses 10–12)

Reports speaking of the betrayal of Noah and Lot by their wives suggest that it was a betrayal of their messages, rather than their being unfaithful to their marriage bonds. Noah's wife used to join the

unbelievers in his community in making fun of him, while Lot's wife used to inform his people when he received guests, knowing what they tried to do with such visitors.

Similarly, reports concerning Pharaoh's wife make it clear that she lived in his palace as a believer in God Almighty, and suggest that she was of Asian origin following a divine religion that was revealed before Moses' time. Historical reports mention that the mother of Eminhuteb IV, the Pharaoh who advocated belief in one god, making the sun a symbol of the divine being, calling himself Ekhnaton, was Asian and believed in a religion other than that known in Egypt. God only knows if she is the one referred to in this *sūrah*, or whether the reference is made to the Pharaoh challenged by Moses and his wife. Moses' Pharaoh is definitely different from Eminhuteb IV. We need not, however, be particularly concerned about the exact identity of Pharaoh's wife. What is important is that the Qur'ānic statement confirms a permanent fact in which individual people are only examples.

Having made an order to believers to protect themselves and their families from incurring punishment in hell, the *sūrah* now highlights the principle of individual responsibility. The Prophet's wives, and indeed wives of all believers, are told here that ultimately they are personally accountable for what they do and the decisions they make. Their individual responsibility cannot be waived merely because they are married to a prophet or to a devout believer. Both Noah's and Lot's wives "*were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.'*" (Verse 10) When the question is one of belief or unbelief, or one of betrayal of faith, there can be no special privilege for anyone, not even for prophets' wives.

Pharaoh's wife gives the perfect contrast. She was living in the midst of sweeping unbelief, but that did not deter her from seeking her own personal safety. She disowned all connection with Pharaoh's palace, praying to God to grant her a home in heaven. She disavowed any relation with Pharaoh, praying that God grant her safety from him. Realizing that as Pharaoh's wife she was the closest person to him and his actions, she feared that some blame might attach to her. She, therefore, made it clear that she had nothing to do with all this, further praying

to God that He keep her away from it: "*And save me from Pharaoh and his doings.*" (Verse 11) She disowned Pharaoh's people while at the same time living in their midst: "*And save me from the wrongdoing folk.*" (Verse 11)

Pharaoh's wife's prayer and her overall position is a shining example of rejecting all temptation that the life of this world can offer, even at its most splendid. Pharaoh was the most powerful king on earth, and his palace offered the best that a woman could desire. Yet his wife chose faith in preference to all this. She did not merely treat it with contempt; she considered it evil and sought refuge with God from yielding to it, praying to be saved from it and its consequences. Yet Pharaoh's wife was a woman standing on her own in the midst of a great kingdom, which makes her all the more admirable and gives her an even greater position. As we have stated earlier, women are more sensitive and responsive to social pressures. However, this woman, on her own, resisted the pressures exerted by society, the palace, the throne, the courtiers and her own royal position, lifting her head to heaven seeking its light. She certainly provides a great example of submission to God, resisting all temptations and overcoming all impediments. Hence she deserved her special mention in God's book, the words of which are echoed throughout the universe as they are revealed from on high.

"*And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān,*" provides another example of total dedication. Her story is given from its early beginnings elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Her distinctive quality mentioned here is her purity, "*who guarded her chastity.*" (Verse 12) Thus, her innocence is made absolutely clear, refuting the vile accusations the Jews levelled at her. "*And We breathed of Our spirit into her.*" (Verse 12) It was from this breathing of God's spirit into her that Jesus, her son, was born, as detailed in *Sūrah* 19, Maryam. We will not go into the details of his birth here, limiting ourselves only to the discussion of the present text which highlights Mary's purity, complete faith and total obedience of God: "*She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout.*" (Verse 12)

The fact that Pharaoh's wife is the one chosen to be mentioned here together with Mary is indicative of her own sublime status; a status enhanced by the special circumstances of her own life. Both ladies are

splendid examples of women who combined firm faith with purity of behaviour and total devotion. God sets these two examples for the Prophet's own wives in the context of the event reported in the first section of the *sūrah*. They are also examples set before believing women in all generations.

This *sūrah* gives us a glimpse of the Prophet's own life, drawn in the inspiring style of the Qur'ān. No human report speaking of the period can give us a similar picture. This because Qur'ānic expressions are more inspiring and far-reaching. In this way, a single event is cited to state the truth that remains valid for the rest of time.